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APPLICATION NUMBER: *60/172,351*
FILING DATE: *December 16, 1999*
PCT APPLICATION NUMBER: *PCT/US00/34101*

By Authority of the
COMMISSIONER OF PATENTS AND TRADEMARKS

M. K. Hawkins

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Docket Number: 294801/005

PROVISIONAL APPLICATION FOR PATENT COVER SHEET (Small Entity)

This is a request for filing a PROVISIONAL APPLICATION FOR PATENT under 37 CFR 1.53 (c).

INVENTOR(S)/APPLICANT(S)		
Given Name (first and middle [if any])	Family Name or Surname	Residence (City and either State or Foreign Country)
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Additional inventors are being named on page 2 attached hereto

TITLE OF THE INVENTION (280 characters max)

METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR BLIND ELECTRONIC WARRANTY REGISTRATION

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ENCLOSED APPLICATION PARTS (check all that apply)

☒ Specification	Number of Pages	8	☐ Small Entity Statement		
☒ Drawing(s)	Number of Sheets	1	☐ Other (specify)		

METHOD OF PAYMENT OF FILING FEES FOR THIS PROVISIONAL APPLICATION FOR PATENT (check one)

		FILING FEE AMOUNT
☐ A check or money order is enclosed to cover the filing fees		
☒ The Commissioner is hereby authorized to charge filing fees or credit any overpayment to Deposit Account Number:	19-4709	$75.00

The invention was made by an agency of the United States Government or under a contract with an agency of the United States Government.

☒ No

☐ Yes, the name of the U.S. Government agency and the Government contract number are _____

Respectfully submitted,

SIGNATURE [signature] Date December 16, 1999

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USE ONLY FOR FILING A PROVISIONAL APPLICATION FOR PATENT

SEND TO: Box Provisional Application, Assistant Commissioner for Patents, Washington, DC 20231

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PROVISIONAL APPLICATION FOR PATENT COVER SHEET (Small Entity)

INVENTOR(S)/APPLICANT(S)		
Given Name (first and middle [if any])	Family Name or Surname	Residence (city and either State or Foreign Country)

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Signature of Person Mailing Correspondence

Leonor Ortiz

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PROVISIONAL APPLICATION

OF

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101 Lake Street
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FOR PROVISIONAL APPLICATION UNDER 35 U.S.C. §111(b)

FOR IMPROVEMENTS IN

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Client/Matter No. 294801/005

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METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR BLIND ELECTRONIC WARRANTY REGISTRATION

When buying a product, in order to qualify for warranty protection, manufacturers often require that the purchaser of the product register the product with the manufacturer by way of return postcard. These postcards request information such as model number, serial number, date of purchase, and point of purchase necessary to identify the goods. The post card usually also requires personal information, such as, name and address of the purchaser or end user to connect the goods to the interested party. Additionally, many manufacturers use the return of these postcards to obtain not only personal information such as name and address of their customers, but demographic information to help them in their marketing and research and development efforts. This is accomplished by forming the warranty registration card as a questionnaire.

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Because the warranty registration cards are used as questionnaires which ask many personal information questions and demographic questions about the product user, users consider this an invasion of privacy. They also consider filling out such cards an inconvenience and wasteful use of their time. As a result, customers are reluctant to register their products for warranties. The number of returned registration cards is less than 10% of all purchased products. As a result, manufacturers cannot properly track their sold products and warranty liability. Furthermore product end users cut themselves off from the company so that they may not receive warranty information or other information such as recall information or product enhancement information from the manufacturer. Accordingly, the manufacturer is hampered in its ability to service the customer and the customer is hampered in its ability to enjoy the full benefits of ownership of a product from particular manufacturers.

Manufacturers are also selling products online. These products are also sold with warranties. Manufacturers at time of purchase, or even prior to purchase, such as during a website browsing session, often ask for similar personal information from their customers and prospective customers to either register the products with the company or to learn about their potential customers. Online purchasers are even more hesitant to provide such

formation to online manufacturers, because in addition to all of the concerns with the prior art warranty cards, there are the added concerns that the manufacturer will turn around and sell the gathered customer information (as is customary in E-commerce), that an unauthorized hacker will obtain this personal information, or even if the information remains with the manufacturer, that the manufacturer will "spam" the customer with unwanted E-mail.

Accordingly, it is desired to provide a system which protects the privacy of the customer, allows the manufacturer to properly service the customer and track the goods sold by the manufacturer, and to encourage the customer to register products in a way accessible and usable by the manufacturer.

In the contemplated invention, generally shown in Fig. 1, a data processing system 100 utilizes a method which allows registration of products in a blind fashion relative to manufacturers to track the products purchased by customers. Manufacturers 30 may include a manufacturer 32 which is a manufacturer of electronic goods such as camcorders, manufacturer 34 which is a manufacturer of children's products and a manufacturer 36 which is a manufacturer of sporting goods. Each of these manufacturers 30 creates their goods as in the normal course of business and sells these goods to customers 20 such as customer M. Jones, B. Smith or R. Johnson. It is irrelevant whether customers 20 purchase the products directly from manufacturers 30 through conventional store outlets, or through online commerce over the Internet.

To register the product for warranty protection, each of the customers registers with a server 10 by utilizing their own personal computer 22, 23, 24. The customers provide personal information sufficient to identify the customer to the server. For example, M. Jones is male, has a birth date of October 6, 1960, and lives at 89 Lovett Road in Newton Centre, Massachusetts. This information is entered into personal computer 22 and transmitted to server 10 where server 10 stores the information in a customer database 12. Similarly, B. Smith is a woman born on September 14, 1959 living in Holmdale, New Jersey. She enters this information at her personal computer 23 and transmits the information to server 10 so that this information is also stored in database 12. Lastly, R. Johnson enters the personal information into computer 24 that he is male, was born

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October 30, 1994, this information is transmitted to server 10 where it is also stored in database 12. The server then assigns each customer a server identifier which can be reentered each time the customer 20 uses server 10 or automatically be stored at personal computers 22, 23, 24 and automatically transmitted by the personal computers (22, 23, 24) each time customers Jones, Smith and Johnson send data to server 10. This identifier could be anything from a server assigned customer number to something which is indicative of the customer and pseudo-randomly generated such as the initials of the user's name plus the numerical representation of their birth date. For example, customer M. Jones may be assigned server number MJ100660 which is also stored in database 12.

When, for example, customer M. Jones purchases a product, manufactured by manufacturer 32, such as a camcorder, Mr. Jones will enter the manufacturer, make, model, serial number and date of purchase into his personal computer 22 and transmit this information to server 10. This information is stored in customer data base 12. If it is the first time that he is registering with server 10 he will also transmit minimal personal information necessary to identify M. Jones to the server. This information is stored in database 12. Therefore when he registers subsequent products he need not re-enter this portion of the information.

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Server 10 also creates, at the time of purchase of a product for a particular manufacturer, a customer identifier which is stripped of all personal information such as customer name, address and e-mail address. The customer identifier could be the same identifier assigned to M. Jones as the server identifier, or it could be a randomly generated alpha-numeric identifier mapped to the data corresponding to M. Jones stored in database 12. The customer identifier is stored as a file or in a manufacture data base 14 and linked to the pertinent information in customer data base 12.

When M. Jones registers the product with server 10, server 10 then passes on the identifier stored in manufacturer database 14 along with the non-personal information corresponding to M. Jones and the product from database 12 to manufacturer A 32. This information includes at a minimum the customer identifier and the product identification information such as make, model, serial number and date of purchase to allow proper warranty registration. Each manufacturer can request for different levels of administrative

rmation received. For example, if M. Jones provided demographic information such as income, age, types of products owned, etc., then this information could also be transmitted to manufacturer 32 at time of registration by server. Manufacturer 32 may elect to receive the minimum information necessary to track products, or may ask for all demographic information within database 12. The system can operate with as little as an e-mail address from each user.

Similarly, if B. Smith purchases children's toys, then B. Smith will enter the make, model and serial number of the product into her personal computer 23 and transmit the information to server 10 where the data will be stored in customer database 12. Again a server identifier and customer identifier will be created if this is a first purchase of manufacturer 34's products, or the previously created identifier for a manufacturer B 34 may be used if B. Smith is already registered for a warranty for a manufacturer 34. A similar process would be performed when Mr. Johnson purchases sporting goods manufactured by manufacturer 36. The same customer identifier could be used to identify a customer to all manufactures, or each manufacturer 30 could elect to format its own customer identifier so that server 10 creates and stores a customer identifier for each manufacturer.

By creating a customer identifier and storing it in database 14 or as a file and mapping it to customer specific information in customer database 12, server 10 acts as a blind between the manufacturers 30 and the customers 20. As a result, customers 20 can feel free to communicate with manufacturer 30 without fear of being spammed, or loss of privacy. Because these concerns are removed more customers 20 would register and manufacturers 30, if they elect to do so, can receive important demographic information regarding their customer profiles to make better business decisions and to service their customers.

Server 10 may also create customer mail boxes 13 at the server for each user. Mailboxes 13 may be password protected to ensure privacy. All data to be sent to a customer 20 would be placed in their mailbox 13 further minimizing contact of any sort with a customer 20, while strengthening the customer blind aspect of the process. This

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allows the server to contact a customer 20 even if customer 20 has changed physical location or e-mail address.

If a manufacturer 30 needs to contact specific customers, such as Mr. Johnson and those who have bought camcorders, it can do so. For example, if a preventive maintenance alert is to be issued or a recall is to be issued, manufacturer 32 identifies all of those purchasers of the camcorder by customer identifier and transmits a message to server 10 along with a list of the server created customer identifiers. Server 10, utilizing manufacturer database 14 and customer database 12 compares the customer identifier with the server identifier with the address information in database 12 and then causes the recall, preventive maintenance or other type of information to be sent to those camcorder purchasers who have registered with server 10, either by mailing to their mailbox 13, by regular mail or by e-mail.

If as part of the personal information Mr. Jones had indicated that he would be willing to receive new product information related to camcorders or any other product manufacturer by manufacturer 32 such permission could be stored in database 12 so that when manufacturer 32 does a burst mailing of other product information, server 10 can filter that mailing to only go to customer mailbox 13 or in the alternative directly to those customers 20 which indicated an inclination to receive such information. Server 10 could also make post-purchase behavior and satisfaction questionnaires and transmit them to customers 20 to determine their satisfaction and transmit this information back to manufacturers 30 if the respective customers Jones, Smith and Johnson decide to fill out such a questionnaire.

Because server 12 maps server identifiers into customer identifiers between customer database 12 and manufacturer database 14, server 10 provides a two-way blind communication between the customer and the manufacturer allaying many of the fears of the customer. This also allows the manufacturer to broadcast product information to those consumers most interested in that information based upon their purchasing history and/or indicated inclination to receive such information. This information could also include warranty expiration information which allowed a customer 20 to reenlist for extended

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warranty protection or make sure that any problems they are experiencing was fixed before the end of the warranty.

However, due to the inconvenience of even registering the product, many customers are reluctant, even in a blind environment, to give such information. However, as with present warranties and questionnaires the manufacturers are interested in fuller demographics, the identification of popular features by the customers, customer satisfaction reasons; all of which can be done without personal information. To incentivize customers 20 to initially register with server 10 as well as to continue to register additional products and to provide follow-up information to those manufacturers 30 which request it, server 10 will award points to each customer Jones, Smith and Johnson as they provide information to be stored in database 12. Therefore, the customers need not necessarily provide all information at once. For example, all that is really required for the system to operate to provide warranty protection and allow manufacturers 30 to provide necessary recall information and warranty information to customers 20 is that customer database 12 include the customer E-mail address, product make, model, serial number and manufacturer for products purchased by that customer and a customer identifier stored in manufacturer database 14 mapped to the personal information in customer database 12.

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As customers 20 register more products, more points will be awarded for using the system. Furthermore, points can be awarded for providing customer satisfaction information post-purchase so that customers are not required to provide this information, but in order to accumulate points, it is in their interest to provide some or all of the information. Even more points may be provided if customers answer manufacturer surveys transmitted by server 10 to personal computers 22, 23, 24 which are unrelated to the specific products purchased by customers 20, but are still of interest to manufacturers, such as customer willingness to buy other products, customer personal income, age, household members or the like. These points may be used to redeem prizes. As points are accumulated, the total point value is also stored in customer database 12 linked to the customer personal information.

The points may be redeemed directly for products offered by any of the subscribing manufacturers 30. Alternatively, contests can be held. The contests are entered by dedicating a certain number of points to enter the contest. Each point represents a discrete entry in the contest. The number of points accepted for any particular contest is capped, but the number of points dedicated by an individual customer 20 is only capped by the number of points the customer has in its account stored in database 12, and the cap on the total number of points available for the contest. The winner is selected randomly among the entrants who commit points to enter. Therefore, chances of winning maybe increased by increasing the number of points dedicated which provides incentive to accumulate points.

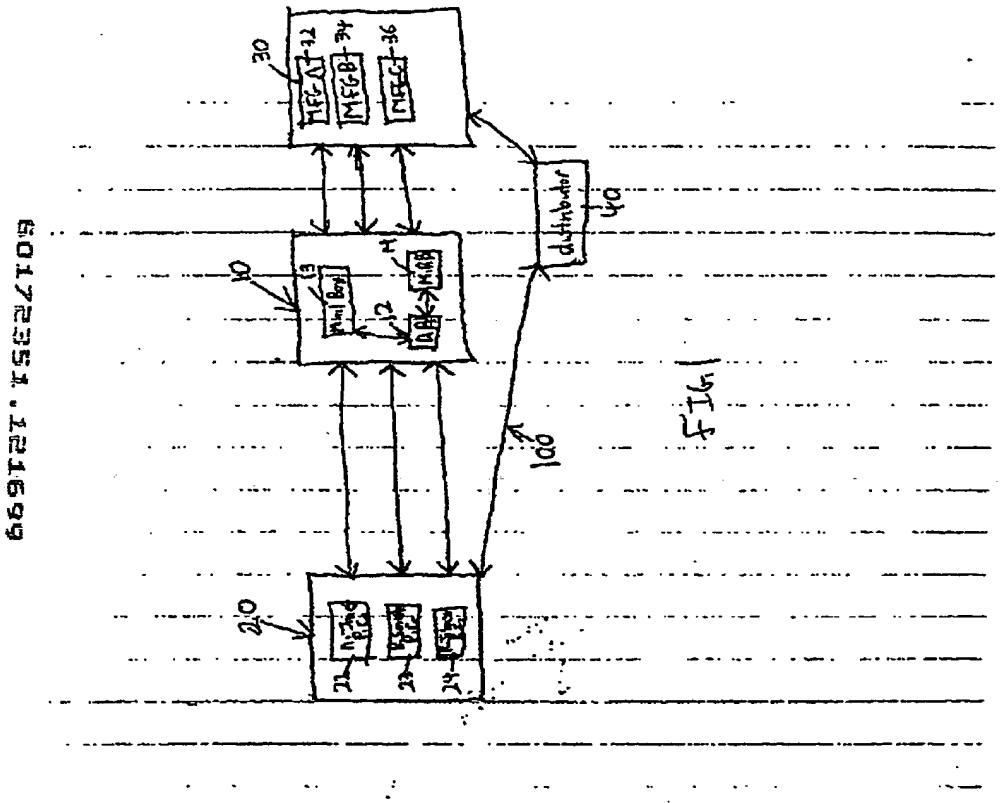
Server 10 tracks the entrants in the contests and notes which types of products any particular customer 20 (Jones, Smith or Johnson) is pursuing. If customer Johnson, for example, is entering for a particular good or class of goods such as children's products, such as strollers, bassinets, cribs, or the like, server 10 will note this. Server 10 will then transmit the information to manufacturer 34, a manufacturer of children's products, that the customer identified by customer identifier is interested in a particular children's product. Then manufacturer B 34 can create a rebate code or coupon code using any internal code generating function, such as random number, serial number, or incorporate the customer identifier and forward that to server 10 with rebate instructions. Server 10 then maps the customer identifier to the server identifier stored in customer database 12 and transmits the rebate instructions to customer mailbox 13 on server 10 or to personal computer 24 so that R. Johnson can receive the rebate offer.

The instructions would include that Mr. Johnson purchase the product, and provide the rebate code along with the make, model, serial number and date of purchase information to server 10. When Johnson purchases the product from a designated on line distributor 40, to which manufacturer B 34 has already forwarded the product, distributor 40 will ship the product to Johnson. Johnson, in accordance with the instructions, will then register the make, model, serial number and rebate code with server 10. Server 10 will then pass this information along to manufacturer 34 in a manner similar to that discussed above. This confirms to manufacturer 34 that a sale has been made as a direct

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sponse to the rebate. Furthermore, manufacturer 34 knows the general information about the customer which made the sale. In this way it can exactly track the effect of its rebate offer and the use of server 10. Additionally, it is server 10 which issues the rebate to customer Johnson maintaining the blind between the customer and the manufacturers 30. Lastly, one instruction may be to redeem the rebate at a particular distributor 40 fostering strategic partnerships between distributors and manufacturers and maintaining a high quality with known distributors.

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